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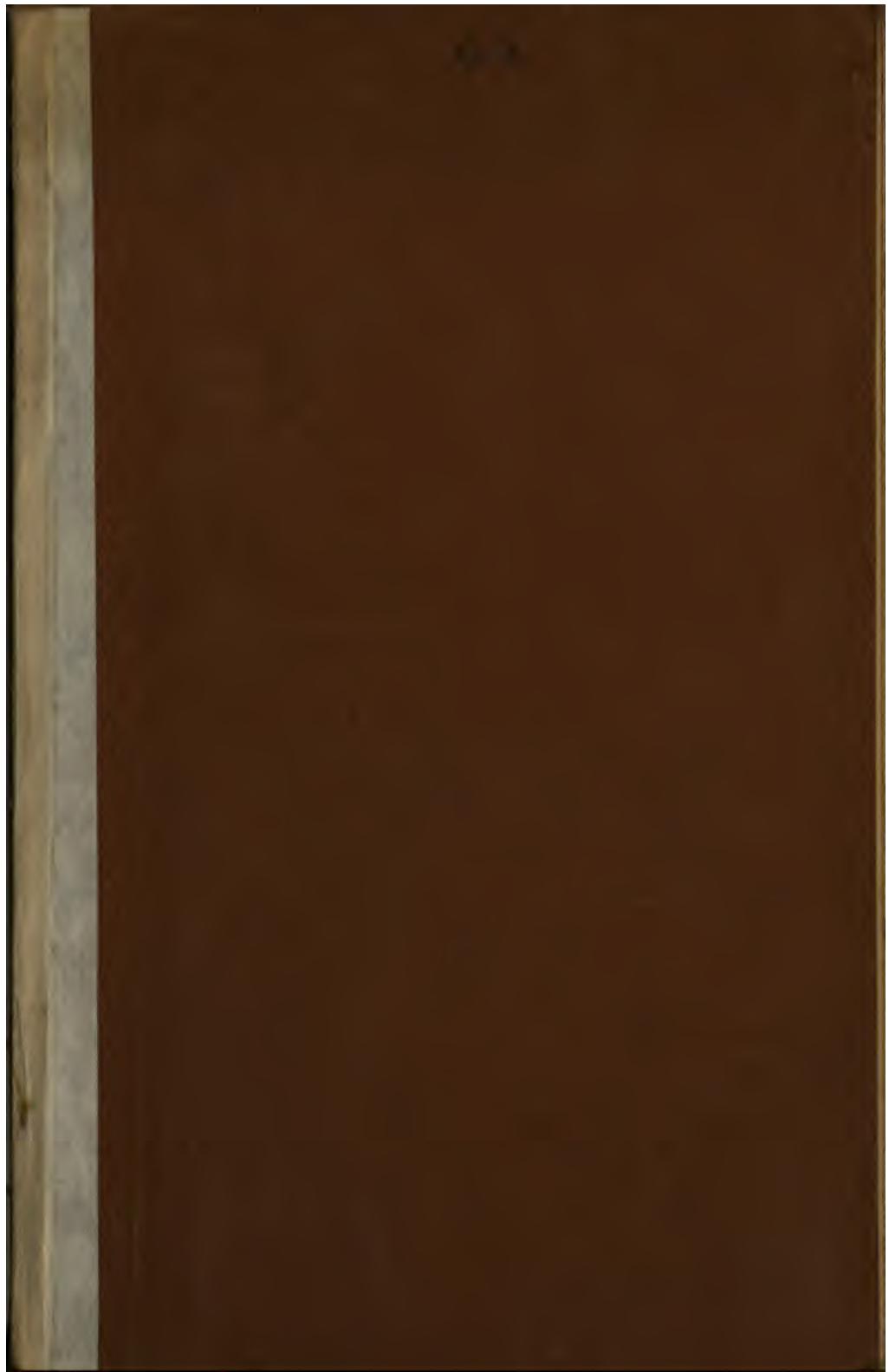
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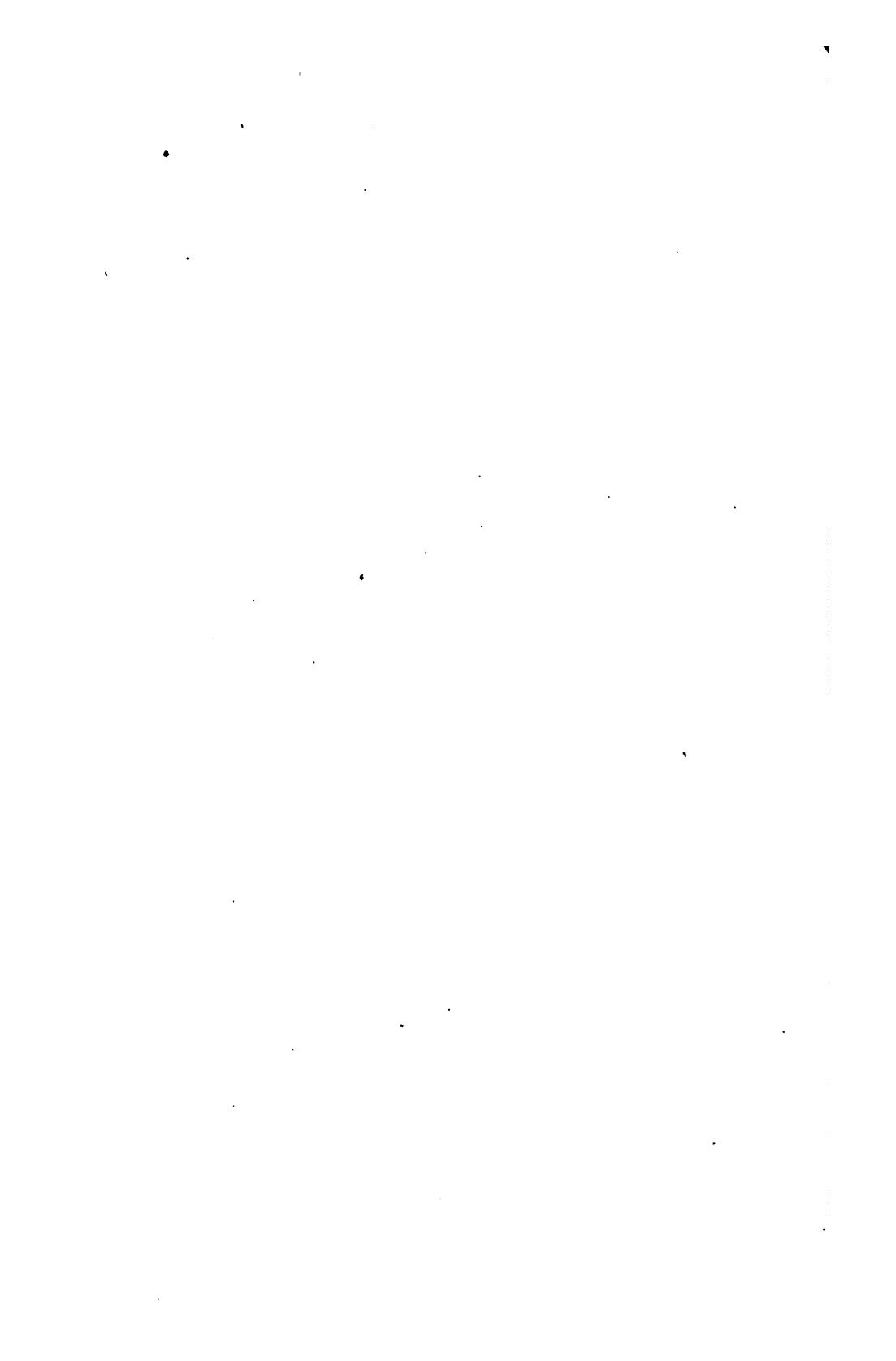
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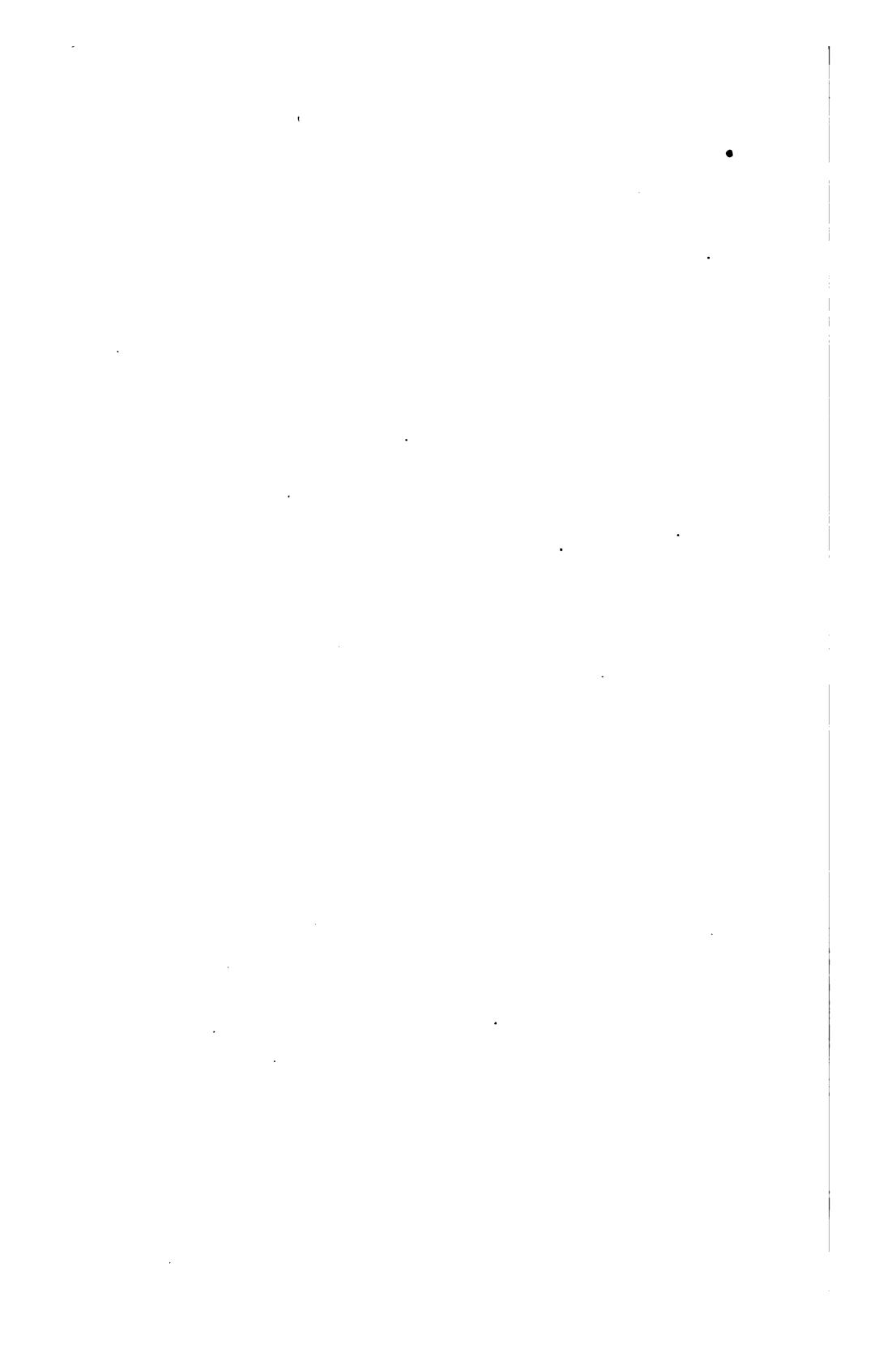
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With the Author's Cons.

THE CAMP ON HAMDON HILL.

BY

HUGH NORRIS,

Local Secretary to the Society of Antiquaries of London, &c., &c.



*(Reprinted from the Journal of the Somersetshire Archaeological and
Natural History Society, vol. x., 1884.)*

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The Camp on Hamdon Hill.

EVERY person living in Mid-Wessex has heard of Hamdon Hill. Every one who knows our beautiful West Somerset churches, knows what Ham stone is. All who have studied Roman Somerset, will remember Hamdon as a Romanized British earth-work, overlooking a portion of the Foss-way near Ilchester. But few, if any, have gone into the story of this fine old camp; and yet a story it must have had, which possibly can only be unravelled by one living near the spot.

Possessing this sole qualification, I have ventured to offer a few speculations of my own, as to the condition of the place in unrecorded ages.

The Society of Antiquaries of London published in 1823 a description of the hill, by the late Sir Richard Colt Hoare, in which that accomplished investigator says, "The earth-works which surround the hill are the most extensive I have ever met with, being in circumference three miles; and the area comprehends above two hundred acres."¹

Let us for a moment review the geographical relations of this remarkable encampment, which is allowed by all antiquaries to have been an early British fortress or entrenched station, adopted subsequently by the Romans.

Rising to a height of 240 feet above the villages nestling at its base, and being 426 feet higher than the sea level, it forms

a spur running almost due north out of the north-west corner of a cluster of hills, which form a kind of irregular parallelogram, about five miles in length from east to west, and one to one a half miles in breadth from north to south. This high ground is scored in not a few places by lynchets or shallow terraces on its slopes, and is intersected by many a winding track-way, whilst several combes are to be seen descending from its summit to the plains beneath. Hamdon itself, together with the northern and western faces of this parallelogram, overlooks the broad valley of the Parret, as well as the great northern watershed of the county, which helps to feed the Severn sea—the *Æstuarium Sabrinae* of the Roman geographers. The eastern extremity of the above mentioned hill district terminating in two “Pens,” (viz., that which gives its name to Penmill, near Yeovil, and another called Pen within the town itself,) dominates the valley of the Ivel. There is a third “Pen” also within this district (called in the Ordnance map Pen-hill) from which the neighbouring village of Pendomer takes its name. This Pen overlooks the Dorsetshire country, of old inhabited by the minor tribe of the Durotriges.

Far less than a thousand years ago the valleys of the Ivel and the Parret must, for a considerable portion of the year, have been almost impassable swamps. A tidal wave came, and still comes, as far as Langport, where there was possibly, but not certainly, a Roman road across the Parret.¹

The Foss-way, constructed on a former British track-way passing within a mile to the north of Hamdon, crossed that river by a ford, at the point now occupied by Petherton bridge,² and this passage, occurring on the chief inland road into the west, must have been always a most important strategic point; indeed, we know it was so considered as

(1). *Vide* map of Roman Somerset. *Proceedings of Som. Arch. and Nat. History Society*, vol. xxiv, pt. ii, p. 1.

(2). Davidson, *British and Roman Remains in the Vicinity of Axminster*, pp. 67, 68.

recently as the time of the civil war in the 17th century, when the bridge was pulled down by Goring's orders, and had to be "made up" by Fleetwood, ere he could cross the river in pursuit of the Royalist troops.¹

The Romano-Belgic city of Ischalis (or the watery place), the Ilchester of the present day, situated about four miles to the eastward of Hamdon, is even now subject to winter floods, which often cover a large acreage of the surrounding country. Westward of the hill, and within two miles of its base, flows in a northerly direction the river Parret; the ancient "Parwyd" or "Afon-y-Parwyd," meaning the boundary or division river.² The source of this stream is to be found in the heights south of the town of Crewkerne, whence it flows, first in a northwesterly, and afterwards in a more northerly, direction, towards the Severn sea. The same high ground gives rise also to the river Axe, which, taking an opposite course, falls into the British channel at Axmouth. These streams have been usually held by antiquaries to form an early natural boundary or partition between different Keltic tribes or peoples; the country of the Damnonii, or Devonshire folk, resting on their western banks.

Situated where it is, Hamdon would almost certainly have been an advanced post of some important tribe, which I have little doubt consisted of the warlike Belgæ. It was moreover not a simple castle or garrison, or place of watch and ward for soldiers only, which the late Mr. Warre believed, perhaps not altogether correctly, was the case with Cadbury;³ it seems to have been a residential stronghold of an exceptionally grand character, capable of sheltering a very large number of occupants, civil as well as military,⁴ and the cluster of hills, of which it forms

(1). Sprigg, *Anglia Rediviva*; also Markham, *Life of the great Lord Fairfax*, pp. 232, 233.

(2). Barnes, *Proceedings Som. Arch. Soc.*, vol. xvi, pt. ii, p. 75.

(3). *Proceedings Som. Arch. Soc.*, vol. viii, pt. ii, p. 66.

(4). Walter, *Proceedings Som. Arch. Soc.*, vol. iv, pt. ii, p. 83.

so strong an outwork, was in all likelihood thickly peopled by a Keltic race, who, depasturing their cattle in the plains below, used the encampment as a fortified station—a citadel in fact—within which their flocks and herds, their women and children, retired in the hour of danger.

Now, since my attention has been thoughtfully directed to this subject, I have often asked myself the question, How came it that so large and important a British stronghold should have been constructed on a spot overlooking what, for a goodly portion of the year, must have been a wide waste of waters? Important indeed it must have been for the Romans also to have occupied it, during so long a period, after the original possessors had been driven forth.

Having answered the above question in some manner to my own satisfaction, I proceed to lay the presumed solution before the Society, and this not in a dogmatic spirit, but rather in a suggestive vein, and as offering a possible explanation of matters that do not at first sight appear quite obvious.

There was, as I have said, at the point where Petherton bridge now stands, a ford, which, according to the late Mr. Davidson and others, must have existed in Keltic times.¹ A careful study of the map, aided by a bird's-eye view from Hamdon, would favour a belief that this ford was for a large and important district to the north and north-east—the key which unlocked the far west, with all its mineral treasures. A mile beyond Petherton bridge, to the north-west, on some gently rising ground, we find the remains of an ancient British station, as evidenced by a few relics in the writer's possession—antler and flint, split bone and coin, all either found by himself or within his own cognizance, upon this eminence. We have also on the western border of this height a series of terraces, called "Mere-Lynches," and near by, a bit of old sunken roadway, now leading nowhere, but the further continuation of

(1). Evidence of this ford may still be seen in the river banks on the north side of the bridge, at low water.

which can be traced to the margin of the river. On this elevation, I make no doubt, was situated the ancient British town of Petherton—*Y Parwyd Dun*—the Dun or stronghold on the Parwyd or border river; an advanced post of the Damnonii, in its turn commanding, but from the *western* bank, the all-important ford, which might otherwise be traversed alike by friend or foe.

Here, then, we see a sufficient reason for the Belgæ making so much of their ‘coign of vantage’ on the *eastern* side, the Dun above the river—above the marshy valley—above the watery city. From this height, too, at a later date, the Romans saw it expedient to watch over the interests they had wrested from the inhabitants of the land. Here they held ward for near three hundred years, yielding up their charge only when disturbing influences at home obliged them finally to quit this country. Were additional proof needed of the importance attached by the Romans to this passage of the river, I would call attention to Dr. Stukeley’s account of the condition of the Foss-way between Ilchester and Petherton bridge in his day. Writing in 1724, he records it as being so perfect that “it looks like the side of a wall fallen down, and through the current of so many ages, is not worn through.” Collinson, quoting Stukeley, states “that in a field near this (Petherton) bridge, a large pot full of Roman coins, to the quantity of six pecks, was dug up about the year 1720,” and he adds, on his own account, “in the same neighbourhood, a little below the surface of the ground, are the remains of Roman buildings. In this spot also coins, fragments of urns, pateræ and pieces of terras have been discovered.”¹ These relics would doubtless show that there was a Roman residence, probably that of some important functionary, at or near this spot.

So far as we know, no Roman name for Hamdon has come down to us, and this need excite but little surprise, seeing we

(1). *History of Somerset*, vol. iii, p. 106.

have no itinerary of the Foss-road. The conquerors probably merely Latinized the Keltic designation; and concerning this we are possibly not so ignorant. Most writers on the subject have assumed that the word Hamdon is a hybrid product of the Saxon “Ham,” a place of residence or a home, and the Keltic “Dun,” a hill fort; *i.e.*, the *Home* upon the *Hill*;—*the Dun, par excellence*, of the district.¹ But it was not, I believe, a common practice with the Saxon invader to make his home upon the fortified hills from which he had expelled the Britons, and here he certainly cleared a spot about the foot of the old camp, which clearing he stockaded and called “Stock” or “Stoke,” by which name, with the addition of “Sub-Hamdon,” it is known to the postal authorities at the present day.

An apparently insignificant and hitherto unnoticed circumstance gives us to know what the Saxons thought about this fortress. On the plan of Hamdon, given by Phelps, in his *History of Somerset*, in what is called “The Combe” (a gully or gorge trending towards Stoke church), there still exists a stream of clear water, gushing from the heart of the hill, bearing the name “Wambury Spring;” in the map, however, this is incorrectly spelt *Hambury*. In a later impression of the same engraving, which illustrates a valuable article on Hamdon Hill, by the late Mr. Richard Walter, in a former number of the Society’s journal,² it appears by its right name, *Wambury*, which every word-student knows to mean “Woden’s Burh,” the stronghold of Woden. Trifling as this may seem, the inference to my mind is clear, that the Saxons, when they settled around the spot, regarded the immense earth-works above them as something beyond the power of human hands to construct, and hence they attributed their authorship to their mythical hero Woden. This again, I take it, militates against

(1). *Vide. Proceedings Som. Arch. and Nat. His. Soc.*, vol. v, pt. ii, p. 78
also Pulman, *Local Nomenclature*, p. 146.

(2). Vol. iv, pt. ii, p. 84.

the theory of the “Ham” upon the “Dun”—the Home upon the Hill.

Let us enquire whether any other clue can be afforded by an analysis of its present designation. A learned associate, Dr. Hurly Pring, a year or two since contributed a very suggestive article on “The Place-name Hampton” to the third volume of the *Antiquarian Magazine and Bibliographer*. He therein shows the probability of the first syllable sometimes being a Teutonic corruption of the Keltic word Afon or Avon, a river. This probability would doubtless be strengthened when there appear valid reasons against the spot in question ever having been a Saxon “home;” and especially when it bears any relation to a neighbouring stream. Nor is this idea fanciful or a matter of guess-work on his part, since he quotes Camden and Leland in support of this theory being applicable in the instances of Northampton and Hampton Court, the former of which was certainly at one time “North-afon-don.”¹ Admitting this, is not it well within the bounds of probability that the early name of the fortress dominating the watery valleys of the Ivel and the Parret—looking immediately over the village of “Mertok *inter aquas*”—commanding also the passage of the border river, would be “*Yr Afon Dun*”—the River Fortress?—the distinctive syllables being corrupted into “Ham,” in common with so many marshy spots which could be enumerated on the river banks, from the Chiselborough flats near Crewkerne, to below Bridgwater?—spots swampy in the winter, but affording rare pasturage for cattle in the summer;—“Afans,” if you please, or river-side meadows, but places where no Saxon “Ham” could possibly have existed?² Even a stranger, casually looking at the camp from any point within three miles to the west or south-

(1). *Britannia*, Gibson’s Edition, vol. i, col. 518 and 367.

(2). Such “Hams” are to be found in Merriott, Chiselborough, South Petherton, Muchelney, Bridgwater, and, in fact, along the banks of many of our Somerset rivers.

west, and aware of a river flowing between himself and the hill, would be at once struck with the appropriateness of such nomenclature. I humbly conceive, then, that it would need no great stretch of the imagination to derive the Teutonic sounding “Hamdon” from the Keltic “Afon-dun,” especially when we know the fate of the alluvial pastures or “hams” above referred to.

On the departure of the Romans, we may presume that the camp and the adjacent hills were once again occupied by a Keltic race—probably Belgic-Britons, now half Romanized, and to a certain extent civilized; living more or less at peace, until the dreaded Saxons came upon them like a torrent, in the seventh century. In the pages of the Anglo-Saxon chronicle we read that “in 652 Ceanwalth fought at Bradford-on-Avon;” another ford, the possession of which seems to have been a great bone of contention between the opposing nationalities. It has been considered that this was an English victory, which deprived the Britons of a long, narrow strip of country reaching from Frome up to Cricklade, which they had previously held in the midst of their enemies.¹ Following up this victory, the Saxons must have steadily driven the Britons before them, until A.D. 658, when we again read in the chronicle, “This year Ceanwalth fought against the Welsh at Peonna (often translated as ‘The Pens’), and he drove them oð Pedrydan,” which may mean either as far as the river Parret (the explanation usually accepted) or to the town of Petherton. In Æthelweard’s chronicle, quoted by Mr. Sharon Turner, we are told that Ceanwalth drove the Britons to *a place called Pederydan*, which is manifestly Petherton itself, and not merely the banks of the adjacent river.

Now, reading between these lines, I would ask, is not it fair to conclude that after the victory at Bradford-on-Avon, Ceanwalth’s forces continued their efforts successfully, so far as to drive the Britons—contesting every inch of ground—from

(1). Freeman, *Old English History*, edition 1878, p. 65.

Dun to Dun, over the Mendips, along the Foss-way, by, or through, or over the strong fort at Cadbury, until, on nearing their important boundary river, the latter, driven to bay, gave battle at the Pens by Yeovil, in front of their hill resort, and their last stronghold on the east of the Parret,—"Yr Afon Dun,"—whence, after a stubborn resistance, they were hurled across the stream to take refuge within the ancient bounds of the Damnonii, in their station of "Parwyd-dun," or "Pederydan;" now South Petherton?

I would not wish to be thought wiser than those learned men who have professed themselves unable to determine where the "Peonna" of the chronicle are situated; I merely desire to call attention to the Pens near Yeovil, and to suggest the probability of their marking the spot where the last great Saxon fight east of the Parret commenced.

I read the entries under the dates 652 and 658 in the chronicle, as simply marking the beginning and the end of the warrior-King Ceanwallh's successful struggle with the British in Wessex. Doubtless during the six intervening years many a fierce engagement took place which has not been recorded. It is said "this battle was a very hard one, and that the Welsh drove the English back for a while, but then the English rallied and beat the Welsh, and chased them as far as the river Parret." "These Welsh Kings were really very powerful princes, and their dominions were larger than those of some of the English Kings. Thus it was a great matter to take from them all the country between the (Somerset) Axe and the Parret, which now, or soon after, became English."¹

Here (*i.e.*, at Petherton), having placed the river between themselves and the Saxons, the Britons appear to have held their ground for more than thirty years, when a greater than Ceanwallh—our own Somerset Ine—appeared upon the scene, and drove them still further into the west, and across the

(1). *Old English History*, p. 66.

Tone, on whose right bank he built his famous castle of Taunton, eventually to be replaced by that which is now the home of our Society.

This boundary, the Britons as a nation never more recrossed. Local tradition and history both tell us that Ine, for a time at least, fixed his residence at South Petherton,¹ which he had possibly made his basis of operations whilst pursuing his career of conquest in the above direction, and it may well be considered not wholly improbable that the Saxons, for a long period after, had a kind of veneration for the place, not only as marking the site of one of their greatest victories, but also as being the first spot on which Saxon foot had rested after entering the territory of the Damnonii.

Collinson says, "When the Romans relinquished this country, South Petherton became the possession and the seat of the Saxon Kings. . . . Ina had a palace here. . . . King Athelstan is reported to have kept his feast at Pedredan, and the possession of this place was thought an object of importance by all his successors, till after the Norman conquest."²

In confirmation of these statements, I have been informed that in the *Liber Albus* at Wells there is a record of the presence at South Petherton of King Edward (the Confessor), his Queen Editha, Tofig ("the proud"), Harold (son of Godwine), and many others of the Court, at a conference touching some matters connected with the temporalities of the unfortunate Bishop Giso.³

Read by itself, it appears almost incredible that the present decayed country town should have been the scene of so many important events, at a period when our history was making; but taken in connection with what has gone before, it seems quite natural that such should be the case, ere the destinies of

(1). See the legend of St. Indractus in Cressy's *Church History*, p. 532.

(2). *History of Somerset*, vol. iii. p. 107.

(3). Kindly communicated by the Rev. J. A. Bennett, of South Cadbury.

our rulers had called them to act in busier scenes, and amid larger populations.

Such then is an outline of the origin of Ham-don, and the part it has played in by-gone ages, as it presents itself to the mind of the writer. It is a meagre outline, truly ; but so far as it goes, it is believed to be compatible with what is actually known of general history ; and it is here given in the hope that some more able man may be induced thereby to correct or confirm, and, if practicable, to fill in, the picture.



